

NEVADA SENATORS PRESS FOR BETTER USE OF FEDERAL FIRE DOLLARS

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Nevada Sens. Harry Reid and John Ensign complained Wednesday that money they've obtained for use in the Tahoe Basin is being held up by bureaucratic red tape. If more of it had been spent on brush clearing and fuel reduction, some of the devastation of last month's Tahoe fire could have been prevented, they said.

"We worked hard to get this money. ... we expected the money to be spent," Reid, D-Nev., told reporters after the senators met with U.S. Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell in Majority Leader Reid's office.

Partly to blame, according to Kimbell and the two senators, are rules around Lake Tahoe that are meant to protect the lake but end up restricting where trees can be cut and brush cleared.

"There are restrictions about mechanical use, there are restrictions about diameter of different trees that might be removed, and there are restrictions that are very specific about how you manage riparian areas along water courses," Kimbell said.

"Some of those treatments, in order to effect them, would be prohibitively expensive, and still any treatment needs to have the necessary approvals," she said.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency that administers some of the restrictions has come in for angry criticism after a blaze destroyed 254 homes and other buildings across about 5 square miles and displaced about 3,500 people late last month. Some residents say the agency overstepped its mission of protecting the lake by imposing unwieldy rules on homeowners including even limiting where residents can rake pine needles.

Last week Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and Jim Gibbons of Nevada agreed to form a panel to determine whether the policies contributed to the fire's ferocity.

Some of those policies may have prevented money targeted for the Tahoe Basin under the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act from being efficiently doled out and spent, according to Reid and Ensign.

The law, which auctions off public land in southern Nevada and uses the proceeds for a variety of public uses, has sent \$22.5 million to the U.S. Forest Service for use in the Tahoe Basin since 2005, but only \$12 million of that has been spent, according to Kent Connaughton, the Forest Service's associate deputy chief.

"We wanted to find out from the Forest Service about what type of bureaucratic rules can we change to make sure the money is able to be spent in an efficient fashion to reduce the fuels at Lake Tahoe and the Tahoe Basin," said Ensign, R-Nev.

Kimbell promised to report to the senators on progress with fuels reduction at Tahoe.

Officials agree that without the clearing of trees, brush and other fuel that did occur in the area, the fire would have been much worse.

Uncleared areas "served as a wick for the fire and caused the fire to spread into areas that it might not have, had that riparian area been treated similarly to the upland slopes," Kimbell said.

The 3,100-acre fire, attributed to an illegal campfire, was declared 100 percent contained July 2.